

A decorative banner with a metallic, embossed appearance. The banner is horizontal and features the title "The Golden Door" in a highly stylized, gothic-style font. The banner has ornate, swirling flourishes at both ends, resembling a scroll or a ribbon. The background of the banner is a light, textured grey, and the text is a slightly darker shade of grey, giving it a three-dimensional effect.

The Golden Door

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An Omnibus Book from Scholastic Australia

1 - The Brothers

It was the season for skimmers, and this year more skimmers than ever were coming over the Wall of Weld.

From dusk till dawn the beasts flapped down through the cloud that shrouded the top of the Wall. They showered on the dark city like giant, pale, falling leaves, leathery wings rasping, white eyes gleaming, needle teeth glinting in the dark.

The skimmers came for food. They came to feast on the warm-blooded creatures, animal and human, that lived within the Wall of Weld.

On the orders of the Warden, the usual safety notices had been put up all over the city. Few people bothered to read them, because they were always the same. But this year, in Southwall, where Lisbeth the bee-keeper lived with her three sons, the notices had been covered with disrespectful scrawls.

ATTENTION, CITIZENS OF WELD! SKIMMER SAFETY

- Stay in your homes between dusk and dawn. *so the Skimmers know where to find you*
- Seal your windows, doors and chimneys. *because Skimmers like a challenge!*
- Note that skimmers are almost blind, but are attracted by signs of life such as movement, light, heat, smell and sound. *so stop breathing!*
- As is my duty, I cast the traditional spells of protection over Weld each day ^{though I know I have less} but please ^{magic in} remember—your safety by night is your ^{me than a} responsibility! ^{Weld goat} *Not mine - I am tucked up safe in the Keep, HA, HA!*

^{USELESS}
The Warden of Weld
^



No one knew who was writing on the notices—or so the people of Southwall claimed when the Keep soldiers questioned them. Like everyone else in Weld, the Southwall citizens were very law-abiding. Most would never have dreamed of damaging one of the Warden's notices themselves. But many secretly agreed with the person who had done so.

Rye, the youngest of Lisbeth's sons, had the half-thrilled, half-fearful suspicion that his eldest brother, Dirk, might be responsible.

Dirk worked on the Wall as his father had done, repairing and thickening Weld's ancient defence against the barbarians on the coast of the island of Dorne. Brave, strong and usually good-natured, Dirk had become increasingly angry about the Warden's failure to protect Weld from the skimmer attacks.

Sholto, the middle brother, thin, cautious and clever, said little, but Rye knew he agreed with Dirk. Sholto worked for Tallus, the Southwall healer, learning how to mend broken bones and mix potions. The soldiers had questioned him when they had come to the healer's house seeking information. Rye had overheard him telling Dirk about it.

'Do not worry,' Sholto had drawled, when Dirk asked him anxiously what he had said in answer to the questions. 'If I cannot bamboozle those fancily dressed oafs, I am not the man you think I am.'

And Dirk had clapped him on the shoulder, and shouted with laughter.

Rye hoped fervently that the soldiers would not question him, and to his relief, so far they had not. Rye was still at school, and no doubt the soldiers thought he was too young to know anything of importance.

As the clouded sky dimmed above them, and the Wall darkened around their city, the people of Weld closed their shutters and barred their doors.

Those who still followed the old magic ways sprinkled salt on their doorsteps and window ledges, and chanted the protective spells of their ancestors. Those who no longer believed in such things merely stuffed rags and straw into the chinks in their mud brick walls, and hoped for the best.

Lisbeth's family did all these things, and more.

Lisbeth sprinkled the salt and murmured the magic words. Dirk, tall and fair, followed her around the house, fastening all the locks. Dark, lean Sholto trailed them like a shadow, pressing rags soaked in the skimmer repellent he had invented into the gaps between the shutters and the crack beneath the door.

And Rye, red-haired and eager, watched them all as he did his own humble duty, clearing the table of Sholto's books and setting out the cold, plain food that was always eaten at night in skimmer season.

Later, in dimness, the three brothers and their mother huddled around the table, talking in whispers, listening to the hateful, dry rustling of the skimmers' wings outside.

'Folk at the market were saying that there was a riot in Northwall this morning,' Lisbeth murmured. 'They said that the Warden's signs were set on fire, and the crowd fought with the soldiers who tried to stop the damage. Can this be true? Citizens of *Weld* acting like barbarians?'

'It is true enough,' Sholto said, pressing a hardboiled duck egg against his plate to crack the pale

blue shell as noiselessly as he could. 'Skimmers killed three families in Northwall last night. It is only the first riot of many, I fear. When people are afraid, they do not think before they act.'

Dirk snorted. 'They are sick of the Warden's excuses. And they are right. Everyone on the Wall was talking of it today.'

'And you most of all, Dirk, I imagine,' said Sholto dryly.

Dirk's eyes flashed. 'Why not? It is obvious to everyone that a new leader must have risen among the barbarians—a warlord determined to conquer Weld at last. Every year, more skimmers come. Every year we lose more food and more lives, and work on the Wall falls further behind. The Enemy is weakening us, little by little.'

'We do not know there *is* an Enemy, Dirk,' Sholto muttered. 'For all we know, the skimmers come here of their own accord. For skimmers, Weld may be nothing but a giant feeding bowl, in which tender prey are conveniently trapped.'

Rye's stomach turned over.

'Sholto!' Lisbeth scolded. 'Do not say such things! Especially in front of Rye!'

'Why not in front of me?' Rye demanded stoutly, though the bread in his mouth seemed to have turned to dust. 'I am not a baby!'

Sholto shrugged, carefully picking the last scrap of shell from his egg.

‘We might as well face the truth,’ he said calmly. ‘A wall that cannot be climbed, and which has no gates, is all very well when it keeps dangers out. But it works two ways. It also makes prisoners of those who are inside it.’

He bit into the egg and chewed sombrely.

‘The skimmers are being deliberately bred, and sent!’ Dirk insisted. ‘If they were natural to Dorne, they would have been flying over the Wall from the beginning. But the attacks began only five years ago!’

Sholto merely raised one eyebrow, and took another bite.

Dirk shook his head in frustration. ‘Ah, what does it matter anyway?’ he said, pushing his plate away as if he had suddenly lost his appetite. ‘What does it matter *why* the skimmers invade? They *do* invade—that is the important thing! Weld is under attack. And the Warden does nothing!’

‘His soldiers fill the skimmer poison traps,’ Lisbeth murmured, anxious to restore peace at the table. ‘He has said that orphaned children can be cared for at the Keep. And he has at last agreed that the end-of-work bell should be rung an hour earlier, so people can arrive home well before—’

‘*At last!*’ Dirk broke in impatiently. ‘That is the point, Mother! The Warden has taken *years* to do things that a good leader would have done at once! If the Warden had not delayed cutting the hours of work, Father would not have been on the Wall at sunset in

the third skimmer season. He would still be with us now!’

‘Don’t, Dirk!’ whispered Rye, seeing his mother bowing her head and biting her lip.

‘I have to speak of it, Rye,’ said Dirk, his voice rising. ‘Our father was just one of hundreds of Wall workers who fell prey to skimmers because of the Warden’s dithering!’

‘Hush!’ Sholto warned, raising his eyes to the ceiling to remind his brother of the skimmers flying above. And Dirk fell silent, pressing his lips together and clenching his fists.



Like all the other citizens of Weld in skimmer season, Lisbeth and her sons went to bed early. What else was there to do, when sound was dangerous, and the smallest chink of light might lead to a skimmer attack?

Rye lay in the room he shared with his brothers, listening to the rush of wings outside the shutters, the occasional scrabbling of claws on the roof.

He prayed that the wings would pass the house by. He prayed that he, his mother and his brothers would not wake, like those ill-fated families in Northwall, to find skimmers filling the house, and death only moments away.

He crossed his fingers, then crossed his wrists, in the age-old Weld gesture that was supposed to ward off evil. He closed his eyes and tried to relax, but he

knew that sleep would not come easily. The closely shuttered room was stuffy and far too warm. Sholto's words at the dinner table kept echoing in his mind.

Weld may be nothing but a giant feeding bowl, in which tender prey are conveniently trapped ...

From Rye's earliest years he had been told that inside the Wall of Weld there was safety, as long as the laws laid down by the Warden were obeyed.

Certainly, the laws were many. Sometimes even Rye had complained that they were *too* many.

He had nodded vigorously when Sholto had sneered that the citizens of Weld were treated like children too young to decide for themselves what was dangerous, and what was not.

He had laughed when Dirk had made fun of the Warden's latest notices: *Citizens of Weld! Dress warmly in winter to avoid colds and chills. Children of Weld! Play wisely! Rough games lead to broken bones ...*

But at least he had felt safe—safe within the Wall.

Lying very still, his wrists crossed rigidly on his chest, Rye thought about that. He thought about Weld, and its Wall. Thought about the history he had learned, and taken for granted. Thought, for the first time, about what that history meant.

Weld had existed for almost a thousand years, ever since its founder, the great sorcerer Dann, had fled with his followers from the savage barbarians and monstrous creatures that infested the coast of Dorne.

Turning his back on the sea, Dann had taken his people to a place where the barbarians dared not follow. He had led them through the dangerous, forbidden ring of land called the Fell Zone, to the secret centre of the island. And there, within a towering Wall, he had created a place of peace, safety and magic—the city of Weld.

After Dann's time, the magic had slowly faded, but his Wall had remained. More than half of the city's workers laboured on it every day, repairing and strengthening it. Every rock and stone in Weld, except for the stones that formed the Warden's Keep, had vanished into the Wall's vast bulk centuries ago. The workers used bricks of mud and straw to mend and thicken it now.

And as the Wall had thickened, little by little, it had crept ever closer to the great trench at its base—the trench from which the clay for bricks was dug.

The trench now circled Weld in the Wall's shadow like a deep, ugly scar. In the past, houses had been pulled down to make way for it. Soon, everyone knew, more would have to go.

The people did not complain. They knew that the Wall, and the Fell Zone beyond it, kept Weld safe. They had thought it always would.

Then the first skimmers had come. And now, after five years of invasions, it was clear to everyone that the days of safety were over.

The barbarians had at last found a way to attack

Weld. Not by tunnelling through the base of the Wall, as had always been feared, but by breeding creatures that could do what had once seemed impossible—brave the Wall's great height, and fly over it.

And we are trapped inside, Rye thought.

Tender prey ...

'This room is stifling!' he heard Dirk mutter to Sholto in the darkness. 'I cannot breathe! Sholto, this cannot go on! The Warden must act!'

'Perhaps he will,' Sholto whispered back. 'The riot in Northwall must have shaken him. Tomorrow may bring some surprises.'